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Gary Simmons

at MARGO LEAVIN, 30 May–3 July

In his lauded "Erasure Drawings," Gary Simmons has found an elegant, if perversely economical means of representing the mental two-step Americans often dance around issues of race, along with the collective case of cultural amnesia that appears to be a byproduct of our times. Simmons typically draws with chalk onto surfaces painted to look like blackboards, then smears and smudges these elaborately detailed images with an eraser or his hands, throwing his entire body into the act of rubbing them away.

In "If Memory Serves," his latest, lovely exhibition of drawings, we glimpse landscapes and relics from a bygone industrial era, one whose central technological and spatial tropes—that of the steam engine and the railroad system—are no longer fixed in the popular imagination. What's most notable about these drawings, however, is that although they employ the same materials as his earlier works, they don't look as much like schoolroom blackboards. Instead, Simmons seems increasingly consumed by issues of pictorial space. He layers various gestures (smear lines, coarse strokes, fingerprints, and vigorous "brushing" motions), while using erasure marks to convey both movement and stasis, the process of memory and the passage of time. Simmons's smears are more aggressively enacted than ever before, and palpably suggest the loss of boundaries between the depicted object and the space around it. The outlines of an abandoned schoolhouse, a boarded-up window, and a shack buffeted in the air by a violent windstorm each have been blurred nearly to

the point of illegibility. Other works conjure a momentary stillness in the midst of rapid motion. Two old-fashioned lanterns clink together like clumsy champagne glasses, while a passenger station and water tower look like places observed as you whoosh past them by train.

Despite their reference to concrete places and objects, these drawings are more elusive than the monumental ghost ships, grand ballrooms, and empty thrones Simmons exhibited at the Lannan Foundation several years ago (an event which served as his artistic coming-of-age party and the institution's bittersweet adios). Perhaps inevitably, his new works are not as ambitious, and tend to engage the imagination a little less dramatically. The pastel-on-vellum works in particular feel surprisingly stolid, despite the tangible violence inflicted by Simmons's heavy, charcoal-like strokes and the bodily residue left by his fingers and hands.

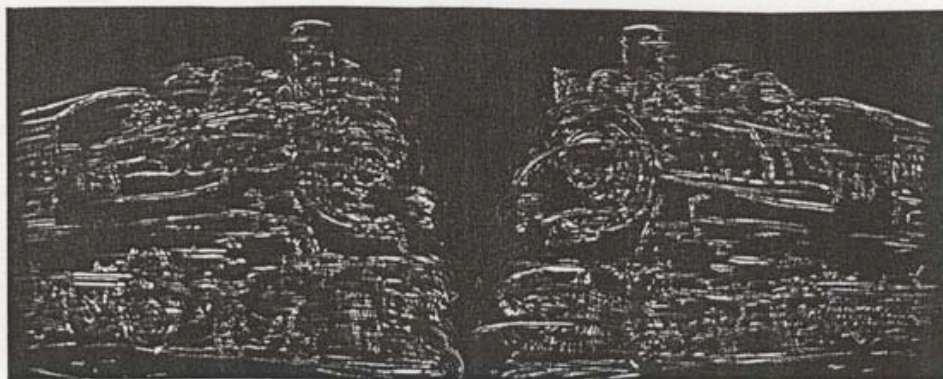
An undisputed crowd-pleaser, however, is the mammoth *Subtlety of a Train Wreck* (all works, 1998). This wall-size drawing depicts two locomotives heading straight at one another, as if only split seconds away from crashing. Given that Simmons has often likened the pictorial space of his monumental works to that of a movie screen, it's hard not to think of these colliding trains in terms of the Lumière Brothers' historic 1895 short, *L'Arrivée d'une train en gare de la Clotat* (*The Arrival of a Train at Le Clotat Station*), one of the first films to be publicly screened. As legend has it, the spectators, most of whom had never seen a film before, jumped back in terror when

a train looked as if it were heading straight toward the projector, off the screen, and into real space.

Across from this impending catastrophe, a smaller drawing of a train station placard asks the cryptic question, "Have You Forgotten Any Personal Property?" In the next room, quadruple versions of a smiling train attendant fan out above a large clock in a work titled *Pullman Time*. These two pieces subtly shift the frame of the entire show. In the eighteen eighties, train travel was associated with the privileges of an upper-class lifestyle, in part due to George M. Pullman's development of the modern sleeping car. The privileged status attached to these luxury berths relied on the presence of recently freed slaves, who worked as low-paid porters (initially receiving no wages other than tips). This system perpetuated the economic exploitation and master-servant relation between whites and blacks that had existed under slavery. Viewed in these terms, the much-mythologized railroad era becomes a decidedly ambivalent moment in the social construction of African-American manhood.

None of this information, however, can be gleaned by looking at the drawings alone. You have to venture outside the work itself to piece the history together, although the emotional legacy is visible right on the surface. Either way, Simmons makes it worth your while to look past the frame, imparting a sense of weight and depth and insolubility to otherwise intangible forms.

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Gary Simmons
*Subtlety of a Train
Wreck, 1998*
Paint and chalk on wall
188" x 400"